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## DERRIDA'S POLITICAL EMOTIONS

### ABSTRACT

*The recent “affective turn” in the humanities and social sciences has often been viewed as a turn away from the kind of textualist or constructivist approaches associated with poststructuralism. Eagerness to get beyond such approaches is usually rooted in a belief in the inability of linguistic models to account for the principally biological or materialist category of “affect.” This article takes issue with this view, showing how affect is in fact central to Derridean deconstruction, notably its conception of the political. Despite meticulous analyses of mourning, grief, nostalgia, love, disgust, and jealousy, however, Derrida’s contribution to the theory of the emotions has rarely been examined in its own right. The article traces the evolution of two affects—desire and anxiety—which it argues are fundamental to the psychical economy of the unsettled subject of deconstruction. For Derrida, the affectionate bonds which tie us to ourselves and to others are always accompanied by anxiety in the face of incalculable loss or destruction. While this paradox emerges in dialogue with psychoanalysis’s theory of the affects, it has important implications for the “politics of deconstruction,” considered here as an attempt to think through the structural contamination of affect and technics.*

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According to a journalistic commonplace, the events of 11 September 2001 brought an abrupt end to the age of postmodernism. The argument usually runs something like this: in a world where polysemy and relativism held glamorous sway, the collapse of the Twin Towers represented the noisy intrusion of the real, a timely wake-up call for a civilization struggling with the burden of near-permanent ironic detachment. Here, if ever, was an event calling for univocal condemnation, for an ethical response founded on universal values of truth, justice, and the good. This view was neatly encapsulated by Roger Rosenblatt in an article published in *Time* magazine less than a fortnight after the attacks:

One good thing could come from this horror: it could spell the end of the age of irony. For some 30 years—roughly as long as the Twin Towers were upright—the good folks in charge of America’s intellectual life have insisted that nothing was to be believed in or taken seriously. Nothing was real [...]. The ironists, seeing through everything, made it difficult for anyone to see anything [...]. The planes that plowed into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were real. The flames, smoke, sirens — real. The chalky landscape, the silence of the streets—all real. I feel your pain— really.<sup>1</sup>

Rosenblatt’s argument rehearses two charges levelled against postmodernism in the aftermath of 9/11. On the one hand, postmodernism was attacked for cultivating irony as its presiding sensibility, for its cynical disengagement from the harsher realities (social, political, economic) of life under late capitalism. At the same time, critics rounded on postmodernism’s active discoloration of emotional life, its loosening of the affective bonds which normally assure our attachment to these realities. In the wake of the physical and emotional damage wrought by the attacks, these characteristics had allegedly been exposed as intellectually glib, if not politically pernicious.

This caricatured version of postmodernist and poststructuralist thought rests, at least in part, on an argument for the inability of these approaches to account for authentic emotional experience (“I feel your pain—really”).<sup>2</sup> According to Frederic Jameson’s well-worn soundbite, postmodernity entails a “waning” of affect: not the disappearance of affectivity per se, but the steady evacuation of

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Rosenblatt, “The Age of Irony Comes to an End,” in *Time*, 24 September, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> The distinction between postmodernist and poststructuralist approaches is a significant one, but my concern here is with their conflation in popular and critical discourse.

meaning from our collective emotional lives, “the emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness.”<sup>3</sup> Although Jameson’s claim has endured much critical pummelling in recent years—waning, we might even say, has been replaced by a whining of affect—, presumptions regarding the incapacity of (post)structuralist-textualist approaches to deal seriously with emotion remain stubbornly fixed, notably in more materialist or Deleuzean-Spinozist currents of affect theory.<sup>4</sup> As Ruth Leys and more recently Eugenie Brinkema have pointed out, affect theorists are often keen to assert their “post-post” credentials by adopting a rhetoric of negation (affect theory is *not* semiotics, *not* textualism, *neither* structuralist *nor* post-structuralist) and critique (we must interrogate the affective unthought of “Theory” by returning to a more primary experience of affect as “autonomous”). In making such claims, however, theorists of affect all too often leave undisturbed a host of theoretical, scientific, and aesthetic assumptions regarding the transcendental priority of affect over meaning, or experience over language.<sup>5</sup> This eagerness to get beyond poststructuralist/postmodernist paradigms is usually rooted in a belief in the essential incompatibility of affect’s immediacy with poststructuralism’s suspicion of the category of “experience.” The obvious corollary of which is that affect theory risks in the same stroke falling back into the very categories of “immediacy” and “self-evidence” which these supposedly faded paradigms began by calling into question.

One theorist who studiously avoids this risk is Rei Terada, whose *Feeling in Theory* offers a compelling account of what a poststructuralist approach to the emotions might look like.<sup>6</sup> Reconstructing an implicit affective framework from Derrida’s early work, Terada argues for the inextricability of “feeling” (emotion in its cognitive and physiological forms) from a decentered view of subjectivity. Her study effectively inverts Jameson’s argument for the waning of affect by asserting that “the classical picture of emotion already contraindicates the idea of the subject.”<sup>7</sup> This is done by rejecting the “expressive hypothesis” (emotions are the tangible exteriorization of an interior, self-present content) and showing, *a contrario*, that there can be no “classical” or self-identical subject precisely because there are emotions in the first place. For Derrida, Terada argues, emotions are the disturbing residue of the subject’s inability to coincide with its own representations, “the remainder that keeps the literal and the figural from matching.”<sup>8</sup>

While admirable in its pursuit of a model that is mostly allusive in Derrida’s early reading of Rousseau and Husserl, Terada’s partial corpus leaves several crucial aspects of deconstruction’s theory of the emotions unexplored. In this article, I will focus on two such elements: *politics* and *technology*. The latter, I argue, are indispensable to a comprehensive account of Derridean emotion and to any genuine attempt to test its contribution to our understanding of what emotions are, how they work, and what role they play in the wider cultural sphere. Here I make two principal claims. First, that Derrida consistently articulates emotion and the political by way of a deconstruction of the classical opposition between the private (or personal) and the public (or political). For Derrida the emotions—or to use a term he invokes far more frequently, the “affects”—are not merely secondary

<sup>3</sup> Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1991), 9.

<sup>4</sup> The term “affect theory” is used here in its broadest sense, to encompass a plurality of approaches (biological, materialist, theoretical, cultural, aesthetic) to the problem of emotional experience. What unites these varied models, however perilously, is an impersonal view of affect, i.e. one which stresses its immediate, bio-physiological characteristics *before* its secondary subjective or cultural ramifications. For a useful “history” of affect theory, see Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, “An Inventory of Shimmers” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 1–26.

<sup>5</sup> Brian Massumi, “The Autonomy of Affect” in *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2002), 23–45. For a vigorous critique of this autonomy, see Ruth Leys, “The Turn to Affect: A Critique”, *Critical Inquiry*, 27 (Spring 2011), 434–472; and Eugenie Brinkema’s “Ten Points to Begin” in *The Forms of the Affects* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2014), xi–xvi.

<sup>6</sup> Rei Terada, *Feeling in Theory: Emotion after the “Death of the Subject”* (Cambridge, Mass. & London: Harvard University Press, 2001), 2.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

or derivative phenomena which political discourse would make use of or “manipulate” according to strategic necessity. Affectivity, rather, is part of the fabric of the political from the beginning, since there can be no communal life in the *polis* without a minimal “politics of friendship,”<sup>9</sup> without the common institution of bonds between subjects which both determine and are determined by affect.

The source of this latter paradox refers us to my second claim. According to Derrida, the subject cannot “experience” affectivity without the structural mediation of *technics*—a concept which intersects with that of technology but which is not entirely reducible to it. One way of rationalizing the link between the subject’s synchronic or structural relationship to technics (as the irreducible prosthesis which “supplements” all self-identity) and its diachronic or historical relationship to technology is by considering the determining role of affectivity in both. If technics and technology allow the subject to “bind” itself to itself, to inscribe itself in and as a representation in the external world, this process of binding is never without affective consequences. For Derrida, we shall see, the subject’s unconditional relationship to technics is always traversed by its historical relationship to technology, that is, to the possibility of an ever-tighter appropriation of sameness or identity and an ever more sophisticated protection against the incalculability that threatens this appropriation. In a strange double-bind, however, the promise of greater technological protection necessarily brings with it a concomitant escalation of the threat or danger, undoing the sense of mastery which technics otherwise seems to provide. Hence the constitutive contamination of the two affects to be examined here: desire, which seeks to create or reinforce a bond to the other, and anxiety, which dreads its potential dissolution. Derrida’s deconstruction of the emotions positions this paradox at the core of our affective relationship to others, and to ourselves as others to ourselves.

## ANXIETY AND TECHNICS

Derrida’s thinking of affect developed in large part independently of the so-called “affective turn”<sup>10</sup> and its now conventional distinction between “affect” (feelings as somatically or biologically determined) and “emotion” (feelings as culturally or socially marked). This is important for a number of reasons, perhaps the most significant of which is that Derrida’s use of terms such as *émotion* or *sentiment* (feeling) tends to be looser and more general than contemporary theory allows. Derrida usually reserves the term *affect* (a somewhat technical French noun rooted in the *Affekt* of German philosophy and psychology) for more academic or theoretical discussions, reflecting the impregnation of French philosophical language by the vocabulary of psychoanalysis. This contextual difference is borne out, for example, by the greater terminological frequency of *émotion* in *The Work of Mourning*, a collection of funeral orations, condolence letters, and other *memento mori* in which Derrida’s audience is chiefly public or personal rather than academic.<sup>11</sup>

If Derrida’s use of the term “affect” overlaps at several points with Freudian *Affekt*, it also displaces the latter in a number of important ways. In psychoanalytic theory, affect refers to “the qualitative expression of the quantity of instinctual [i.e. drive] energy” attached to a given idea or representation (*Vorstellung*).<sup>12</sup> For Freud, affect is “spread over the memory-traces of ideas somewhat as an electric charge is spread over the surface of a body”;<sup>13</sup> in other words, it qualitatively tinges psychical content with feeling (pleasure, pain, desire, anxiety) by binding (*binden*) itself to a particular idea or ideas, a mechanism which facilitates the definition of repression as the active separation of ideas from affects. Like Freud, Derrida will hold to a basic distinction between affect and “representation” (*Vorstellung*), or what he more typically calls the “signifier”—a term flexible enough to cover psychical or mnemonic inscriptions, physical and sonic traces, and so on.<sup>14</sup> The key

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* (London: Verso, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> Patricia Clough, “The Affective Turn: Political Economy, Biomedicine, and Bodies,” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, 206.

<sup>11</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (London: Karnac Books, 1988), 14.

<sup>13</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, edited and translated by James Strachey and others, 24 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74) I, 60. Hereafter SE in the text.

<sup>14</sup> At the height of the structuralist vogue, Laplanche and Pontalis note that *Vorstellung* was increasingly rendered as “signifier” (p. 200).

differences between Freud and Derrida, however, will converge on the question of the *priority* of affect over the signifier. Instead of affect infusing a signifier with qualitative energy (like “an electrical charge,” as Freud suggests), Derrida will argue that it is always possible for affect *to be invaded by a signifier*.

In his written appreciation of Barthes’s legacy, “The Deaths of Roland Barthes,” Derrida clarifies the porous relationship between affect and signifier through the example of the photographic image. Meditating on what Barthes calls the *punctum*, an ostensibly minor photographic detail which cuts through the photo’s objective qualities and transfixes its observer, Derrida writes: “as the place of irreplaceable singularity and of the unique referential, the *punctum* irradiates and, what is most surprising, lends itself to metonymy. As soon as it allows itself to be drawn into a network of substitutions, it can invade everything, objects as well as affects.”<sup>15</sup> If the *punctum* is definitionally a singular phenomenon, it can also be generalized through repetition, hence the image’s metonymic power: the woman’s doleful expression is that of *my* mother and *all* mothers. In this sense, the *punctum* conforms to the structure of every signifier in general, insofar as it is subject to the rules of convention (repetition) without being absolutely determined by them. As singular *and* repeatable, the *punctum*-signifier can invade not only the object itself (a classically deconstructive argument) but also, crucially, our affective relationship to the object. For Derrida affect is structurally predetermined by representation, a move which effectively subverts the orthodox metaphysical view of “affect as a thematic (of a photograph) or expression (of an independent being).”<sup>16</sup> Affect no longer unconditionally precedes and colours our appreciation of a signifier, as though somehow “autonomous”<sup>17</sup> vis-à-vis the latter, as its natural origin (*archē*) or aim (*telos*), but is always already bound up with the signifier as *technē*, with the play of identity and difference involved in every act of inscription.

In deconstruction, then, affect is a physiological and cognitive state—we physically grieve for the lost maternal object recalled to us by the photographic signifier—which is neither fully autonomous with respect to the signifier nor fully determined by it. One particular affect plays a constitutive role in Derrida’s account of the subject’s relationship to itself, to others, and to the world: *anxiety*. As Derrida’s “To Speculate—on ‘Freud’” affirms, anxiety is indispensable to the subject’s prosthetic relationship to technics, i.e. to the technical signifier which “supplements” or stands in for a supposedly pre-existing, “natural” self.<sup>18</sup> Anxiety is privileged here because it involves not only cognitive (as a state of helpless unknowingness, it is both intentional and non-intentional) and embodied aspects (it involves behavioural repetition and other distinct physiological markers); it also suggests the structural interdependency of the psychical and the somatic. In classical Freudian anxiety, the individual attempts to come to terms with a state of cognitive helplessness through repetition, something Derrida argues cannot take place without the mediation of technics. Anxiety is

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<sup>15</sup> Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, 57.

<sup>16</sup> Brinkema, *Forms of the Affects*, 90.

<sup>17</sup> In this sense, Derrida’s theory of affect is quite opposed to Massumi’s view of affect as “autonomous” with respect to consciousness-dependent process such as meaning, intentionality, belief, cultural content, etc. Massumi’s famous analysis of the snowman video experiment in “The Autonomy of Affect” explains the contradictory affective responses (happy-sad, pleasurable-unpleasurable) of the video’s audience with reference to a “bifurcated” human response system: one affective (concerned with the intensity of the images’ effects), the other conventional (responding to the “content” of the images as culturally or linguistically determined). Although Ruth Leys’s forceful critique targets Massumi’s assumptions—“are not sad films sometimes also pleasurable or enjoyable?” (“The Turn to Affect,” 448)—, she does not really propose an alternative explanation of this affective anomaly. Such a model can, I think, be found in Derrida’s theory of “binding” (developed below) as the structural contamination of affect and signifier. In this account, the snowman video would be lived as “happy-sad” *and* “pleasurable-unpleasurable” precisely because it dramatizes a paradox at the heart of all affective binding of the subject to the other: the bonds which tie us to others are pleasurable in that they yield a sense of mastery over the object and over ourselves, but this same process of binding is always haunted by the unpleasurable, incalculable possibility of the dissolution of such bonds. Hence the video’s dramatic tension or *pathos* stems from the threat of the snowman’s disappearance (quite literally: melting).

<sup>18</sup> Jacques Derrida, “To Speculate—on ‘Freud’”, in *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 257-410.

intrinsic to the process of subjectivation because the subject's presence-to-self is predicated on an ineradicable non-self-identity. As the perpetual deferral of the "present," *différance* entails the insinuation of an irremediable gap or difference between the subject and its own representations. The "present" moment never "arrives" because it is always unseated in its coming-to-be by a future that is structurally incalculable.<sup>19</sup> It is this very incalculability which motors the subject's anxiety by continually disturbing the otherwise calculating manoeuvres of subjective consciousness.

Since Derrida's thematization of anxiety emerges in dialogue with Freud's notion of *Angst*, it is instructive to begin with the latter. In the second chapter of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the experience of anxiety provides Freud with a diagnostic link between the debilitating trauma suffered by soldiers returning from the First World War ("shell-shock") and the cheerful busyness of a child at play. Freud notes that soldiers returning from the trauma of trench warfare often complain of "anxiety dreams," particularly those who have suffered a severe concussion. What he calls the "mechanical theory" of trauma forges a causal link between the patient's neurotic repetition of such dreams and physical lesions left by a sudden, intense mechanical force such as a bomb explosion. Freud ultimately rejects any explicative model based on the physiological localization of the wound, proposing instead that traumatic neurosis, and the debilitating anxiety which accompanies it, is in fact caused by a *psychical* lesion, by a scar left in the virtual topography of the unconscious. In making this claim Freud is attempting to explain the origin of both war- and peace-time traumatic neuroses, and he will do so by arguing that the "chief weight of causation" lies with the "factor of surprise, of fright (*Schreck*)" (SE, XVIII, 12).

A linguistic difficulty must first be surmounted, however. Freud notes a great deal of confusion surrounding the way we conventionally talk about affects of apprehension. Three separate terms—*Schreck*, *Furcht*, and *Angst* ("fright," "fear," and "anxiety")—are often used interchangeably when in fact each refers to a very specific type of apprehension. *Schreck* (fright) refers to the affect experienced when an individual encounters a danger without being prepared for it in any way. Fear (*Furcht*), by contrast, requires a definite object to instil fearfulness in the individual. Anxiety (*Angst*), finally, describes "a particular state of expecting the danger or preparing for it, even though it may be an unknown one" (SE, XVIII, 12). Freud thus introduces a strict opposition between a calculating anxiety and an unknowing fright, flatly rejecting the possibility that "anxiety can produce a traumatic neurosis." Instead, he emphasizes the element of the unforeseeable as the common and the most decisive factor in determining cases of traumatic neurosis since there is "something about anxiety that protects its subject against fright and so against fright-neuroses" (SE, XVIII, 13).

Freud will later conclude that this "something" is the level of *quantity* (*Quantität*) of external stimulation received by the organism. Traumatic neurosis is the result of "an extensive breach being made in the protective shield [the sense-organs of organisms designed to filter sudden, dangerous external excitations] against stimuli" (SE, XVIII, 31). In contrast to the mechanical theory of trauma, which regards direct damage to the histological structure of the nervous system as the main causative factor, psychoanalysis wants to understand "the effects produced on the organ of the mind by the breach in the shield against stimuli." Two distinct but related affective responses—anxiety and fright—play a critical role here. Fright results from the "lack of any preparedness for anxiety," while anxiety corresponds to the hyper-cathexis (*Überbesetzung*) of the systems which are first to receive the stimulus (SE, XVIII, 31). When an individual is in a state of unpreparedness (i.e., when he or she is not exhibiting anxiety), the relevant psychical systems are not cathected (energized) to a degree which would allow the organism to bind and master the energy in-flowing from the breach in its protective shield. Differences in the level of cathexis of the psychical systems will predetermine whether the outcome will be traumatic or not. It does not matter whether this level can or cannot be calculated by existing scientific methods (Freud concedes that it cannot, at least at present): what matters is that the quantity of investment of these psychic systems remains in principle *calculable* (SE, XVIII, 32). In other words, the calculation of an experience's intensity, and of the corresponding

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<sup>19</sup> The detail of Derrida's argument can be found in his *Voice and Phenomenon: Introduction to the Problem of the Sign in Husserl's Phenomenology* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2010), especially Chapters V and VI.

level of cathexis of the psychical systems, will eventually allow us to determine, *avant* or *après coup*, whether the individual will or will not be traumatized.

In this quantitative model, anxiety dreams are the mind's attempt at mastering "stimulus retrospectively, by developing the anxiety whose omission was the cause of the traumatic neurosis" (SE, XVIII, 32). If the traumatized soldier had originally suffered from anxiety, the trauma would never have occurred since anxiety is a state of hyper-preparation for a sudden influx of external stimulus (fright). The compulsive repetition of anxiety dreams is a sign, then, not only of the quantitative intensity of the original traumatizing experience but also of a desire to master the psychical wound by actively (re-)staging the experience in a fresh situation of anxiety.

But if repetition is less a state of exception than a "function" (SE, XVIII, 62) fundamental to the homeostatic regulation of cathexis, it will be more fruitful to examine a "normal" case of neurotic repetition. This, of course, is the famous example of the child's game of *fort-da*. This game consisted in Freud's grandson Ernst throwing certain objects into places where they were difficult to retrieve and in doing so uttering a cry of "o-o-o-o"—interpreted by Freud as an attempt at articulating the word "fort," the German word for "gone" (SE, XVIII, 14-15). Freud reports witnessing a number of variants of the game, the most famous of which involves a spool (*Spule*), a small block of wood tied to a piece of string. Indeed, this version commands the greater part of his attention and consisted in Ernst throwing a spool into his curtained cot so that it disappeared from sight. Ernst then pulled the spool out of the cot again and hailed its reappearance with a joyful "da" ("there") (SE, XVIII, 15). Freud's quantitative model places the weight of explanation on an economics of psychical compensation. Playing with the spool, and various other implements, rewards the boy for the instinctual renunciation required each time his mother is unexpectedly absent. By manipulating the mother's symbolic representation (the piece of wood), by playing at renunciation (*fort*) and satisfaction (*da*), Ernst compensates himself for the traumatizing effects of these disappearances. By calculating these maternal absences, he can effectively master the comings and goings of his own anxiety. The game of *fort-da* thus develops the anxious expectation (i.e., hyper-preparedness for a coming shock) which would have prevented the occurrence of the trauma in the first place.

The apparent neatness of this model, however, presents a number of unresolved questions. Why does the boy's game continue irrespective of whether or not the mother is physically present? And why is the game itself repeated in a number of different forms? Freud himself seems curiously unconcerned by obvious variation in the boy's choice of symbolic object or "toy." Derrida's "To Speculate—on 'Freud'" responds to both questions by showing how anxiety is a cognitive and physiological response to a structural incalculability that disturbs the essential distinctions of classical subjectivity (self/world, psyche/reality, inside/outside, and so on).<sup>20</sup> His argument is thus antipodal to Jameson's claim that the absence of "a self present to do the feeling" entails "a liberation from anxiety."<sup>21</sup> In order to show how the affect of anxiety is in fact rooted in the essential non-coherence of the classical subject, Derrida's reading of the *fort-da* game focuses on the point at which the classical antitheses of the subject seem strongest: the frontier between the "natural" interiority of the psyche and its technical representation in the external world, encapsulated here by the boy's playthings. Despite obvious differences between versions of the game, what interests Derrida is the common structure underlying each variant. In each iteration described by Freud, Ernst is manipulating a different technical object, what Derrida collectively refers to as his *outils utiles*. Far from being accessory playthings, these tools accomplish useful psychical work. They form an irreplaceable part of the *fort-da* movement, of the game of distancing and return:

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<sup>20</sup> For a synthetic account of anxiety as a philosophical topos, germane to my argument insofar as it locates the affective force of anxiety in "a non-something in space and the nothingness of the not-yet in time", see Chapter 8 of Brinkema's *The Forms of the Affects*. Drawing on Barthes and Derrida, Brinkema's claim that "the form of anxiety is a structure in process" (p. 191) represents a rejoinder to Massumi's argument that poststructuralist models remain too beholden to the stasis of form and language and are incapable of thinking affect (or intensity) as movement.

<sup>21</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 15.

This good little boy, however, had an occasional disturbing habit of taking any small objects he could get hold of and throwing them away from him into a corner, under the bed, and so on, so that hunting for his toys and picking them up was often quite a business (SE, XVIII, 14).

For Freud, we saw, the purpose of these “toys” is to alleviate anxiety by calculating with traumatic separation. Although Derrida too highlights the determining role of anxiety, he will place the weight of emphasis not on the symbolism of the objects as such but on “the operation of distantiation”: the act of throwing the toys, the separation between the boy and the objects to hand.

In the complete game, this act of dispersion is always followed by a second act which “consists of reassembling [*rassemblement*: gathering together], of searching in order to bring [...] together.”<sup>22</sup> The first version of the game described by Freud, in which the parents collect Ernst’s wandering toys, contains two elements common to each subsequent version: a process of *rassemblement* (bringing together) and the presence of a technical object (the *Spielzeuges* or “playthings”). Derrida’s detailed reading shows how each version conforms to a fundamental structure of “autoaffection,” the construction of the self through technical re-presentation: “if he separates himself from his *Spielzeug* as if from himself and with the aim of allowing himself to be reassembled [*rassemblé*: brought together, rounded up], it is that he himself is also an aggregate whose reassemblage [*réajointement*: realigning, re-joining] can yield an entire combinatorial of sets.”<sup>23</sup> The separation from the self made possible by the technical object allows Ernst to gather himself in a movement of *rassemblement*, to gain a semblance of mastery over his own “identity.” Paradoxically, however, it is at this same moment of technical supplementation that Ernst becomes a multiplicity of selves (“an aggregate”), a disjointed subjectivity whose apparent coherence is both produced *and* threatened by his interaction with these objects.

The second version of the game described by Freud involves a different instrument of autoaffection, though one which is no less exemplary of the boy’s technical skill (*technē*): verbal articulation. Here Derrida takes up again his well-known deconstruction of the supposedly pure interiority of phenomenological consciousness (“the voice that keeps silent”), arguing that the boy’s verbal discourse is a *technē* that is irreducibly exteriorizing.<sup>24</sup> This verbal displacement is interpreted here not (or not simply) as a constative *description* of the game of *rassemblement* (as in Freud’s account) but as yet *another version* of the same game of dispersal and retrieval. The phonic utterance provides the minimal exterior inscription or spatialization necessary for the self-overhearing of “autoaffection,” performing a self by producing the effect of a “proper” name.<sup>25</sup>

For Freud, the spool version remains the game’s most exemplary example insofar as all previous versions involved only the first part of the game (distancing, “fort!”). The wooden block is pulled back into view by the boy who locks the cathectic object in sight as a way of assuaging the anxiety its loss occasions. It would be a mistake, I think, to privilege this version of the game, as Freud does, since both previous iterations (the first involving toys, the second verbal articulation) can also be said to involve a movement of return over which the boy has some degree of mastery. Some psychical gain is clearly derived from obliging his parents to return his toys to their proper place (“hunting for his toys and picking them up was often quite a business,” SE, XVIII, 14), whether it is a matter of pleasure, mastery or both. And with Ernst’s repeated articulation of “fort!” and “da!,” what counts is less the utterance of the famous double vocable (*fort-da*: there-here) than the triple vocable *da-fort-da* (here-there-here). The pleasure taken in the play of identity and difference, in identity *in* difference, is less pleasure taken in the difference between “fort” and “da” than pleasure taken in the *return* of a putatively identical “da” after a necessary insinuation of difference (“fort”). The repetition of “da” can only ever be an imperfect iteration, however, since the spool which returns

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<sup>22</sup> Derrida, *The Post Card*, 309.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Derrida, “The Voice that Keeps Silent,” *Voice and Phenomenon*, 60-74.

<sup>25</sup> Derrida, *The Post Card*, 312.



("da!") does not return to precisely the same subject who launched it, a failed homecoming which explains the urgency of the game's narcissistic repetition.

Despite this difference-in-repetition, the spool remains a "vehicle" (*véhicule*): the technical vector of a supposedly pre-existing signifiable self.<sup>26</sup> Derrida's use of this word alludes to Freud's strange observation that "it never occurred to him to pull [the spool] along the floor behind him, for instance, and play at its being a carriage" (SE, XVIII, 15). This vehicular reference is significant, for it will be by scrutinizing its function as a counter-example in Freud's text—i.e., as a game that is only ever *da*—that Derrida will question the apparent security of the child's technical investment in autoaffectation. Derrida reasons that if the piece of wood had been pulled along behind him like a train, then the string would be kept "at a distance continuously, but always at the same distance, the length of the string remaining constant, making (letting) the thing displace itself at the same time, and in the same rhythm, as oneself."<sup>27</sup> In this fictive, counter-factual version of the game, the threat of *différance* as the threat of the future's unforeseeability would have been eliminated in advance and with it the need for repetition and return ("this trained train does not even have to come back [*revenir*], it does not really leave").<sup>28</sup> The risk involved in instituting a space between oneself and one's representation through technics (namely, the risk that the spool-object may not return to the "same" person who displaced it) would thus be put out of play, with *différance*'s incalculability either suppressed entirely or reduced to a calculable distance in which the measurable string remains in a state of constant, quantifiable tautness. The thrust of Derrida's reading, however, is to show that the act of technical inscription always entails an incalculable risk of self-difference, alterity, and even destruction. And it is precisely this threat which arouses our anxiety.

Freud refers to a final version of the game in a short footnote. This version is crucial to my argument since it sheds valuable light on Derrida's account of the relationship between anxiety, technics, and technology. Freud writes: "the child had found a method of making himself disappear. He had discovered his reflection in a full-length mirror which did not quite reach to the ground, so that by crouching down he could make his mirror-image 'gone'" (SE, XVIII, 15, n.). While this iteration simply confirms Freud's original hypothesis, for Derrida it attests to the *specular* ambitions of the game. The child "plays the utility of the *fort/da* with something which is no longer an object-object, [...] with his own 'bobine' [spool], with himself as object-subject within the mirror/without the mirror."<sup>29</sup> Structurally, the mirror plays the same autoaffective role as each of the previous technical objects (toys, voice, spool), but it is also a privileged example because it exemplifies the specular aims of *all* technics: to re-produce the "real" in as unmediated (or im-mediate) a form as possible. The mirror's capacity to reflect an apparently identical self seems to far outstrip the crude implements of the earlier iterations of Ernst's game. The temporizing delay of *différance* here seems at its most diminished and, as a consequence, the boy at his most "alive." For Derrida, nonetheless, the sense of self-presence generated by the mirror's superior specular capacities is always confounded by an inherent spectacularity (the semantic drift or *dérive* of all self-symbolization). Even the technological sophistication of the mirror cannot be put entirely beyond the play (*jeu*) of *différance* as self-difference or non propriety.

## POLITICS OF AFFECT

The second chapter of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* makes a daring pirouette from the "dark and dismal" (SE, XVIII, 12) theme of warfare to the sunnier subject of children's play. The apparent incongruity of this shift is justified by a common psychical function which has in both cases been subject to obstruction. Later in the text, Freud gives a name to this function: "binding" (*Bindung*) (SE, XVIII, 31). Binding is the process by which freely circulating energy—which in excessive quantities can endanger the organism's survival—is immobilized by "binding" (*binden*) this affective energy to

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 314.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 315.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid..

<sup>29</sup> Derrida, *The Post Card*, 318.

an idea or representation (*Vorstellung*). In the case of both the trauma of warfare and separation from the mother (birth is “the first great anxiety-state”, SE, XIX, 58), what is at stake is a failure to bind a sudden, excessive influx of external excitation caused by a “lack of hypercathexis of the systems that would be the first to receive the stimulus” (SE, XVIII, 31). The latter, notes Freud, in one of the many military metaphors which suffuse his text, represents “the last line of defence of the shield against stimuli” (SE, XVIII, 31).

Derrida’s reading of Freud places considerable emphasis on the rhetoric of mastery or *Herrschaft* (lordship, domination, rule) underpinning Freud’s hierarchical map of the psychical apparatus. To the question of which agency is ultimately in control of psychical life, numerous answers are tested and rejected by Freud: from the pleasure principle to its “modification,” the reality principle, from the compulsion to repeat to an innate drive towards aggression, destruction, and death. The latter, Freud speculates, may be subject to an even more primary drive for mastery (*Bemächtigungstrieb*) (SE, XVIII, 16). This difficulty in enthroning a single psychical sovereign—every time a likely candidate is found, another appears to contest its authority—provides ready material for Derrida’s reflections on the aporetic structure of mastery, what he will, in his more explicitly political writings, treat under the heading of “sovereignty.”<sup>30</sup> As in his reading of *fort-da*, Derrida will argue that the paradox of mastery, psychical or otherwise, is that it is always predicated on the unconditional loss of power entailed by *différance*. The subject must invest in technical supplementation (spatialization) to assert mastery over itself and its surroundings, but in this very act of investment it leaves itself vulnerable to being deposed in a future that is structurally uncontrollable.

The political repercussions of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* are not limited to Freud’s militaristic or governmental metaphors, however. Derrida finds in Freud’s account of a hypothetical unicellular organism (SE, XVIII, 26-29) a model which accounts not only for the constitution of individual subjectivity but also for that of the group or the body politic. The political implications of this allegory of the “vesicle” (*Blaschen*) are registered in the politico-military rhetoric Freud deploys to describe its structure. The single-celled organism gradually develops a “protective shield” against excessive environmental stimulus, something Freud likens to a border and even a warfront. This shield eventually develops into “sense organs” capable of sampling relatively minor “doses” of excitation from the outside world, giving the organism valuable information about reality and warning it against any impending dangers.<sup>31</sup>

The affective implications of Freud’s vesicle allegory are by no means lost on Derrida. In the midst of a cluster of military analogies, Freud describes the state of panic into which the organism is plunged when its protective shield is breached and it is unable to prevent a massive influx of excitation. As if in a state of terror, the organism’s prevailing hierarchy is suspended, the hitherto dominant pleasure principle is put “out of action” (SE, XVIII, 29), and the organism sets in motion “every possible defence measure” to contain the sudden invasion of stimulus. A contrapuntal psychical charge or “anti-cathexis”<sup>32</sup> is deployed to the “front” to bind the incoming excitation.<sup>33</sup> But this anti-cathexis by definition entails an impoverishment of the other cathected psychical systems, forcing the organism to attack itself in order to defend itself, to bind the threat and bring sovereign order to a state of panic.

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), where Derrida distinguishes between sovereignty (itself structurally dependent on the spatialization of technics) and unconditionality (i.e. of *différance* as temporization, the incalculability which renders us vulnerable towards the future as *à-venir*) (p. xiv). What links psychical and political mastery here is the relationship between affect and autoaffectation, defined as “a taking pleasure in the self, a circular and specular autoaffectation [...]”. We must never dissociate the question of desire and of pleasure when we treat the political, and especially the democratic, the question of conscious or unconscious pleasure, from the calculation and the incalculable to which desire and pleasure give rise” (p. 15).

<sup>31</sup> *The Post Card*, 347.

<sup>32</sup> “Anti-cathexis” translates the German *Gegenbesetzung*, for Derrida yet another “strategico-military figure” since one of the meanings of *Besetzung* (cathexis) is “occupation” (p. 348).

<sup>33</sup> On the notion of the “front” and its relationship to the body politic, see Derrida’s remarks on the Front national and its foundational rhetoric of the “quasi-biological hygiene of the inviolate national body” (Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler, *Echographies of Television: Filmed Interviews* [Cambridge: Polity, 2002], p. 18). The fictive purity of such a front is, he argues, undermined by the structural violation of inside and outside entailed by the deathly *technē* (p. 18-9).

If this process of binding is crucial to the organism's integrity, it also refers to the function by which the individual links itself to others. For if the traumatic comes from the outside, from a sudden influx or invasion of stimulus, it also comes from the interiority of the drives, from the drama of unforeseen separation and the sudden breaking of libidinal bonds. The *fort-da* game calculated with the untimely disappearance of the libidinal object (the mother) through the symbolic (Freud) or technical (Derrida) representation of these presences/absences. In *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, a text roughly contemporaneous with *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud makes the difficult transition from individual to mass psychology by arguing that "the essence of a group lies in the libidinal ties existing in it" (SE, XVIII, 95-6). Psychoanalysis's innovation vis-à-vis competing accounts of group identity concerns its location of the origin of the group—"of a race, of a nation, of a caste, of a profession, of an institution" (SE, XVIII, 70)—in the narrower circle of the family, specifically in the libidinal bonds obtaining within it. These bonds are usually rooted in infantile experiences of attachment and separation. As Freud notes, the "ambivalent emotional attitudes" expressed by crowds are probably related to children's ambivalent relationship to their nearest and dearest, as the affective see-saw of pleasure and unpleasure in *fort-da* suggests. One key consequence of this is a heightening of affectivity in groups, in which the individual's "liability to affect becomes extraordinarily intensified" (SE, XVIII, 88). The "emotional ties" which "constitute the essence of the group mind" (SE, XVIII, 91) coalesce around the group leader, a figure of admiration who comes to replace the individual's ego ideal and whom each member of the group shares in a common identification. For Freud, this explains the necessity of hierarchical organization in groups such as the Church and the Army, yet such libidinal investment in a single sovereign object also brings with it an essential danger. For if the object is unexpectedly lost and the corpus is not sufficiently prepared for this loss, panic ensues: "the mutual ties have ceased to exist, and a gigantic and senseless fear is set free" (SE, XVIII, 96). Such "panic fear" represents the incalculable risk of loss or dissolution which for Freud underpins every act of libidinal investment.

Like Freud, Derrida locates an irreducible emotional ambivalence—desire for presence, anxiety in the face of loss—at the core of the process of binding.<sup>34</sup> What he calls the "*bindinal* economy"<sup>35</sup> of *différance* entails that the act of binding oneself to an object and to others (spatialization, inscription, investment: in short, desire) is always threatened by the incalculability of potential loss (temporization, delay, difference: the source of anxiety itself). For Derrida there can be no desire without this structural anxiety because desire for presence is at the same time anxiety in the face of loss. Like Freud, too, Derrida will base his thinking of the group on the ambivalence of binding as a function of mastery. As he writes of Freud's vesicle analogy, its "metaphor can be transferred onto every corpus, every organism, every organization"<sup>36</sup> and indeed, as we have seen, Freud's biopolitical analogies already suggest a natural metaphorical transference in this direction. If the process of binding always involves a minimal "quota of affect," then affect must play a key role not only in Derrida's account of individual subjectivity but also in his theory of political subjectivity, of the corpus as body politic.

Indeed, one of Derrida's most important political texts, *Politics of Friendship*, takes as its explicit premise the inextricability of affective bonds from the sphere of the political. At first blush, the text provides a deconstructive reappraisal of the concept of friendship in political theory and philosophy, from Plato to Carl Schmitt. Yet the importance it accords to affect in the history of political thought ranges far beyond the mere affection of friends, encompassing a wide range of related feelings: Eros, *philia*, desire, admiration, hatred, anxiety, grief, mourning, loss, and so on. For Derrida, bonds of affection between individuals are always threatened by the incalculability of a

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<sup>34</sup> More specifically, Derrida follows Freud in coupling libidinal desire and anxiety in the face of the loss of object, but where Derrida finds paradoxical simultaneity Freud sees catabolic transformation or succession: "One of the most important results of psychoanalytic research is this discovery that neurotic anxiety arises out of libido, that it is a transformation of it, and that it is thus related to it in the same kind of way as vinegar is to wine" (SE, VII, 224).

<sup>35</sup> *The Post Card*, 389.

<sup>36</sup> *The Post Card*, 347.

world in which these bonds must take root and may also one day be severed. The structural incalculability of *différance* upsets the calculating ideal of enduring equality on which friendship is canonically thought to rest, in Aristotle for example, and ensures that there is always something asymmetrical or “out-of-joint” in our affection for others.<sup>37</sup> While political friendship (idealized in the political-personal bond of *fraternité*) may tie us to the other, it can never do so inextricably and irreversibly, since it is an unconditional possibility of such bonds that they may one day come undone. The social contract, the signed constitution, the memorandum of understanding are always inscribed in the shadow of their potential dissolution which, although it may be subject to calculation, retains an irreducible incalculability which can never be neutralized in advance.<sup>38</sup>

It could be objected that such political bonds ultimately rest on the more “original”, “natural”, or “immediate” bonds of friendship between individuals and as such are merely derivative or parasitic with respect to the latter. In fact, Derrida’s rethinking of friendship as deconstructive of the personal/political binary begins by calling the apparent primariness of the fraternal bond into question. While the notion of affective bonds between citizens continues to play an important role in contemporary political discourse, Derrida argues that repeated emphasis on the “natural” quality of these bonds in fact conceals a more fundamental process of conceptual *renaturalization*.<sup>39</sup> One need only look to the contemporary paradoxes of globalization to see that the artificiality of concepts such as “naturalization” or *jus sanguinis* is more apparent today than ever before. It is important to note, however, that it is not the *reality* of affective political bonds that Derrida is contesting here, merely the idea that these bonds causally stem from natural biological categories, such as a common hair or eye colour. If, for Derrida, the natural immediacy of political bonds is always in a sense derived or “fictive,” the question remains as to the true source of such bonds. We have already found the answer in *fort-da*: the affective bond can only be constituted through the mediation of technics, through the inscription of a calculating signifier which binds us to an other who has always already exceeded and escaped this mark.

It might seem that Derrida’s “denaturalization” of political affect effectively strips the political of its emotional armature and replaces it with a purely technicist or technocratic model of political discourse. On the contrary, the increasing importance of technics and technology in the political sphere actually has the effect of intensifying the role of affect. This is why Derrida is ultimately suspicious of the classical opposition of the personal and the political, something which emerges very clearly in his reading of Carl Schmitt in *Politics of Friendship*. Schmitt’s *The Concept of the Political* attempts to found a concrete theory of the political on the concept of the enemy: “the specific political distinction, to which political actions and notions can be reduced, is the distinction between friend and enemy.”<sup>40</sup> For Derrida, this definition is “classical” insofar as it adheres to a range of oppositions intrinsic to political theory since Plato (inside/outside, sameness/otherness, identity/difference), which aim at preserving the conceptual integrity of the body politic from an always identifiable or localizable “foreign” body. Derrida’s reading of Schmitt thus proceeds by highlighting the aporias attendant on this supposedly “pure” definition of the political, several of which converge, crucially, on Schmitt’s failure to think politics’s constitutive articulation of affect and technics.

Schmitt’s desire to found a rigorous theory of the political on a pure concept of the enemy (in Derrida’s words “only a *concrete, concretely determined* enemy can awaken the political)<sup>41</sup> leads him to oppose personal and political concepts of enmity. Schmitt’s enemy is always a “public” enemy;

<sup>37</sup> *Politics of Friendship*, 63.

<sup>38</sup> For a close reading of the attachment and dissolution of Anglo-American “political bands,” see Derrida’s “Declarations of Independence,” *New Political Science*, 7, 1, pp.7-15.

<sup>39</sup> “Everything in political discourse that appeals to birth, to nature or to the nation—indeed, to nations or to the universal nation of human brotherhood—this entire familialism consists in a renaturalization of this “fiction.” What we are here calling ‘fraternization’, is what produces symbolically, conventionally, through authorized engagement, a *determined politics*, which, be it left- or right-wing, alleges a real fraternity or regulates spiritual fraternity. Has anyone ever met a brother?” (*Politics of Friendship*, 93).

<sup>40</sup> *The Concept of the Political*, tr. George Schwab (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1976), 26.

<sup>41</sup> *Politics of Friendship*, 138.

the notion of a private enemy is in fact fundamentally meaningless: “the enemy is not the competitor of the adversary in the general sense of the term. Neither is he the personal, private rival whom one hates or feels antipathy for.”<sup>42</sup> To assure definitional rigour, Schmitt must strip his concept of the political of all aspects which threaten its coherence: “the concept [must] be purified [...] of everything opposed to the political or the public, beginning with the private: anything that stems from the individual or even the psychological, from the subjective in general.”<sup>43</sup> In an idealizing move, Schmitt attempts to put the political beyond reach of the subjective, starting with what is most synonymous with subjectivity: the affects. The principal means of achieving this is by appealing to etymology, to the distinction between *hostis* (the enemy of a political community) and *inimicus* (private or personal enemies), a distinction which Schmitt argues is already operative in Plato’s *Republic*.<sup>44</sup> What is ultimately decisive in this distinction is the presence or absence of affect, for the conceptual clarity of the political and the public requires that

sentiments would play no role; there would be neither passion nor affect in general. Here we have a totally pure experience of the friend-enemy in its political essence, purified of any affect—at least of all personal affect, supposing that there could ever be any other kind. If the enemy is the stranger, the war I would wage on him should remain essentially without hatred, without intrinsic *xenophobia*. And politics would begin with this purification [...] war without hatred.<sup>45</sup>

It is not surprising, then, that Derrida, in contesting this opposition of private affection and public rationalism, will appeal to the structural contamination of personal and political entailed by technics. The technological revolutions of recent decades have, he points out, only underscored the already “threatened, fragile, porous, contestable” nature of the border between public and private,<sup>46</sup> a fact strikingly evident in the evolution of technologies of warfare, terrorism, and surveillance. The conceptual validity of Schmitt’s enemy “axiom,” for instance, has become less secure than ever since the Cold War, before increased virtualization began to obscure the figure of the enemy and its geopolitical localization. This process has in turn intensified the role played affects such as anxiety and terror in political discourse. As exemplary of the increased porosity of public and private, Derrida cites the now somewhat forgotten controversy surrounding the “Clipper chip,” a micro-device designed to give the United States government access to the telephone-related data of its citizens.<sup>47</sup> Although the chip proved unworkable and was eventually abandoned, the controversy surrounding its implementation attests to a fundamental paradox in our relationship to the *technē*: technics violates the frontier between inside and outside, private and public, precisely in order to render this frontier more identifiable, more robust, more sovereign.

## TECHNOLOGIES OF TERROR

*Politics of Friendship* concludes that there is no politics that is not also a politics of binding, a politics of exploiting the bonds between individuals in the government of the national, international, or supranational corpus. The shift in focus from the impossibility of “mastering” individual identity (exemplified in Ernst’s *fort-da*) to the impossibility of the absolute “sovereignty” of a community (cultural, linguistic, religious, political) is reflected in a terminological shift in Derrida’s later writings. An earlier concern for the emotive drama of “autoaffection” gives way to an increasingly pressing insistence on what he will call “autoimmunity.” The simultaneous biological (autoimmunity

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<sup>42</sup> Schmitt, *Concept*, 28.

<sup>43</sup> *Politics of Friendship*, 86-7.

<sup>44</sup> Schmitt, *Concept*, 28, n.9.

<sup>45</sup> *Politics of Friendship*, 88-9.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

refers to the paradoxical process by which an organism attacks itself in order to defend itself) and political (*immunitas* grants absolute protection against future prosecution) resonances of the term mean it is particularly suited to expressing the contradictions of group identity. Hence “autoimmunity” first appears in Derrida’s work with reference to the constitution of religious communities, where the bonds of a shared inheritance are linked to divine indemnity and the messianicity of the future.<sup>48</sup>

The importance of this quasi-biological trope in Derrida’s later work is rooted in his earlier account of Freud’s vesicle allegory, which protects itself against external dangers by deadening its outer “shield” and allowing small, immunizing doses of otherwise dangerous excitation to filter through its membrane. The underlying continuity between autoaffection and autoimmunity is also evident, however, in their shared reliance on technical investment as indispensable to the cycle of protection and vulnerability which *affects* every corpus, whether individual or institutional. If affect will again play a key role in Derrida’s later work, it is because the “*terrifying* and inescapable logic of [...] autoimmunity” is inextricably caught up with technics and technology.<sup>49</sup>

This terminological substitution is accompanied by a significant reorientation in Derrida’s mode of argumentation. While much scholarly ink has been spilled wrangling over a so-called “political turn” in Derrida’s later writings, there is a clear shift away from an early detachment from the contemporary political sphere to an increasing concern, perhaps dateable to 1994’s *Specters of Marx*, with the “actuality” of global politics. A brief reference to the Clipper chip affair excepted, the Derrida of *Politics of Friendship* (a text also published in 1994 but incorporating seminars given in 1988-1989) was still able to justify his studied avoidance of “illustrations [taken] from the most spectacular ‘news’ on political scenes: local, national, European or worldwide” out of a concern for dispassionate “sobriety,” a desire not “to exploit that which, as it were, *screens out* reflection by projecting itself with the pathetic and ‘sensational’ violence of images on to a too easily mediatizable scene.”<sup>50</sup> Such resolve, we shall see, was soon abandoned.

Part of my argument here is that Derrida’s late turn towards the contemporary “political scene” is motivated by a growing need to clarify the relationship between our structural dependence on technics and our historical relationship to technology. As the passage just cited suggests, this realization brings with it increased emphasis on the role of affect in political discourse, with the link between technical or specular re-presentation (the relationship between the “screen” and the “too easily mediatizable scene”) and the affective (“the pathetic and ‘sensational’ violence of images”) becoming steadily more imperative, particularly in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks. It is natural then that Derrida, in his response to 9/11, first in “Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides” and later in *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, will once again turn to psychoanalysis to interrogate the relationship between affects of apprehension, technology, and terrorism. A key concern of these texts will be the way in which terrorism depends on technology as a means of *exploiting* individual fears (hence its “-ism”), just as governments are in turn dependent on the autoimmunity of the *technē* in their struggle against terrorist organizations. Although designed to alleviate our anxiety in the face of potential dangers, technologies of defense can just as easily intensify our anxieties. In stark contrast to Schmitt’s desire to purge the political of the regional discipline of psychology, Derrida’s provocative claim in *Rogues* is that our understanding of politics depends on our capacity to “reckon (*compter*) with the logic of the unconscious,” a phrase which signals the importance he will once again place on values of (in)calculability in understanding affective life.<sup>51</sup> One could even say that these late reflections on the body politic proceed by aligning Freud’s theory of psychical defense mechanisms (*fort-da*) with political mechanisms of defense, the

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<sup>48</sup> Derrida, *Acts of Religion* (London & New York: Routledge, 2002), 87.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 80, n.2 (emphasis my own).

<sup>50</sup> *Politics of Friendship*, 272.

<sup>51</sup> Derrida, *Rogues. Two Essays on Reason* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 157.

means by which nation states attempt to preserve and maximize their sovereign power through increasingly sophisticated technical *savoir*.<sup>52</sup>

Technology's role in calculating with the future forms a major motif of Derrida's response to the 9/11 attacks. As he tells Borradori, "from the very first televised images, those of CNN, [...], it was easy to *foresee* (*prévoir*) that this was going to become, *in the eyes* of the world, what you called a 'major event.' Even if what was to follow remained, to a certain extent, *invisible* and *unforeseeable*."<sup>53</sup> If everyday language places a premium on visual metonymies of prediction, this is because witnessing is always haunted by an irreducible incalculability (even the immediate future remains "invisible" or "unforeseeable"). The privilege accorded to the calculation of spatial and temporal presence extends beyond everyday linguistic usage, however. Calculation also forms a fundamental part of our concept of psychical trauma. In Derrida's interview with Borradori and in *Rogues*, the traumatic character of 9/11 provides a forceful example of how a classical concept of trauma—i.e. one based on the calculable quantity or intensity of a wound, encompassing both "mechanical" and psychoanalytic theories of trauma—continues to influence our current understanding of terrorism. Derrida's discussion of the intensification of affect as the immediate aim of terrorism can here be read, I think, as an implicit critique of Freud's argument for the inherent possibility of calculating quantitative levels of anxiety, that is, of articulating a direct proportionality between a quantity of excitation and the quality of an affect. Derrida will equate the "state of anxiety" which results from suffering a trauma (here a large-scale terrorist attack) not with the calculable intensity of an unexpected and violent past experience (as in a classical Freudian model), but with the incalculability of a future in which an event could occur which would be *unquantifiably worse* than the one suffered in the past. It is this incalculability which is ultimately determinative of affect:

However much one may try to contain the effects of September 11, there are many clear indications that if there was a trauma on that day, in the United States and throughout the world, it consisted not, as is too often believed of trauma in general, in an effect, in a wound produced by what had effectively already happened, what had just actually happened, and risked being repeated one more time, but in the undeniable fear or apprehension of a threat that is worse and still to come. The trauma remains traumatizing and incurable because it comes from the future.<sup>54</sup>

This rather remarkable claim is reinforced by a concrete thought experiment. Derrida asks us to imagine, in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Towers, that reassurance were possible that the violence of the attacks had come to an end and that there would never again be such an event on such a catastrophic scale.<sup>55</sup> If it were possible to calculate infallibly with the future in this way, the process of mourning could be concluded in a relatively short amount of time. Yet this in no way corresponds to what actually happened in the weeks and months following the attacks, a period in which the vulnerability of the body politic was actively exploited by competing ideological interests stressing "the threat of the worst to come" rather than "an aggression that is 'over and done with.'"<sup>56</sup>

Despite or perhaps because of this structural link between affect and incalculability, contemporary notions of terror and terrorism remain strikingly committed to the language of calculation and quantity. Terrorists, for instance, almost always justify the brutality of their attacks through an economics of revenge, of violence and counter-violence. A terrorist act, Derrida notes, usually presents itself as "a response in a situation that continues to escalate" (*dans une situation de*

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<sup>52</sup> In *Rogues*, *savoir* (technoscientific knowledge) is structurally linked to *voir* (seeing) and *prévoir* (foreseeing), to the calculation of a future withdrawn from absolute calculation (p. 128).

<sup>53</sup> Derrida, "Autoimmunity," 109 (emphasis my own, with the exception of "in the eyes").

<sup>54</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, 104.

<sup>55</sup> Derrida, "Autoimmunity," 97.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

*surenchère*: in a situation of reciprocal outbidding).<sup>57</sup> It is because of the previously inflicted violence of an aggressor-state that the counter-violence of the terrorist attack must be *even worse*, or at the very least equal, to the past wound. The same logic of calculability underpins common accusations against powers such as the United States and Israel that they are “more terrorist” than the terrorists themselves.<sup>58</sup> Yet even a cursory examination of the evidence shows that comparable quantities of violence do not always (indeed rarely do) produce equal levels of anxiety: “quantitatively comparable killings, or even those greater in number, whether immediate or indirect, never produce such an intense upheaval when they occur outside European or American space (Cambodia, Rwanda, Palestine, Iraq, and so on).”<sup>59</sup>

Why is this so? In the *fort-da* game, we saw, the fundamental disequilibrium between qualitative (affect) and quantitative (calculability) stemmed from a congenital dependency on technics, the means by which we ordinarily circumscribe or calculate with the incalculable. This disequilibrium explains why Derrida, in his late writings, places particular emphasis on the role of technologies of communication in determining our “experience” of affect, notably those which exemplify the *specular* and *spectacular* dimensions of all technics. For Derrida, mass media news reporting is essential to the success of terrorism since terrorist attacks always aim at producing a maximum of quality (anxiety, fear, dread) from a minimum of quantitative violence. This requires the active exploitation of media communication networks as a means of accentuating the spectacular or theatrical dimensions of what appears to be merely a neutral or specular act of reporting. Terrorism attempts to unsettle the calculating and therefore reassuringly spatialized/temporalized aspect of the latter (who, what, where, when, why) by drawing on the incalculable imaginative drift of the spectacular or the symbolic. In the case of September 11, it was the symbolic heads of capitalism (the Twin Towers) and government (Washington) that were set apart as privileged targets, in order to trigger a maximum number of “psychic effects (conscious or unconscious) and symbolic or symptomatic reactions.”<sup>60</sup> Such affective capitalization on the spectacular structure of news reporting explains why the putting to death of thousands of people in a short amount of time can provoke fewer and less intense psychical and political effects than the murder of a single individual in a single country “with highly developed media resources.”<sup>61</sup> By pre-conditioning our apparently “autonomous” affective response to terrorist violence, technics entails that there can never be a rigorously calculable correspondence between the numbers of deaths (or extent of damage inflicted), the trauma suffered, and the affect “provoked.”

The last half century has seen the conventional link between “terrorism”, “territory”, and “terror” radically put in question by accelerated technological transformations.<sup>62</sup> These transformations have, on the one hand, alleviated our anxieties insofar as we are now under the protection of ever-more sophisticated technologies of calculating the real (satellite and video-link communication, digital passport control, advanced missile defense systems, and so on). On the other hand, they have also intensified such feelings, notably with regard to the increasingly non-localized or virtualized nature of our relationship to technology. This is particularly the case for contemporary practices of terrorism, where the historical link between terrorism and territorial localization (in nationalist movements, for instance) has given way to the increased obsolescence of physical locality in the planning and execution of terrorist attacks. As Derrida points out, terrorists are no longer dependent on “crude” technologies such as planes and bombs; they can now deploy computer viruses capable of paralyzing the economic, military, and political resources of an entire state. It is thus not only physical buildings which are now vulnerable to attack but also “the computer and informational networks on which the entire life (social, economic, military, and so on) of a great nation, of the

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<sup>57</sup> Derrida, “Autoimmunity,” 107.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 101.



greatest power on earth, depends.”<sup>63</sup> The advent of microbiological warfare may indeed render the physical spectacle of terrorism obsolete, replacing it with “invisible” or “uncontrollable” threats which will only aggravate our anxiety in the face of potential suffering and loss: “nanotechnologies of all sorts are so much more powerful and invisible, uncontrollable, capable of creeping in everywhere. [...] Yet out unconscious is already aware of this; it already knows it, and that’s what’s frightening [*c’est ce qui fait peur*].”<sup>64</sup>

This emphasis on uncontrollability is critical, for it points to a constant theme in Derrida’s later work: the intrinsically unmasterable nature of our relationship to technology, an argument which has significant consequences for the deconstruction of state sovereignty. Since the collapse of the USSR as a superpower, widespread anxiety in the face of a terrorist attack has intensified following the arming of “rogue states” by leading Western powers. Such states have proven to be largely unpredictable in their pursuit of sophisticated, often nuclear weapons. At the same time, it is becoming less and less possible to confine these “rogue” threats to a single geographical location, in which “organized, stable, identifiable” powers are “localizable” and “territorialized.”<sup>65</sup> During the Cold War, two apparently equal forces were locked in a strategy of game theory, which provided at least a semblance of calculability to the conflict’s escalating sequence of wagers (*surenchères*); since 9/11, however, it has been more and more difficult to counter-balance and thereby neutralize a terrorist threat that by its very nature cannot be absolutely localized to a single nation state.

The sense of vulnerability generated by this decreasing calculability requires a concurrent increase in the military (i.e. technoscientific) preparedness of the US and other so-called “target” nations. As in Freud’s theory of anxiety as a state of hyper-preparedness for trauma, the calculating function of technics is crucial here. In *Rogues*, the same necessity of self-protection which petrified the protective shield of Freud’s vesicle is at work in technologies which reinforce the national border of the United States and expel (or keep out) all that is threatening to it. We have already seen, however, how the autoimmunity of technics means that the frontier between inside and outside, domestic and foreign is always susceptible to contamination. Derrida provides a striking example of this unconditional vulnerability in his discussion of the discrepancy between the conceptual vagueness of official definitions of “rogue states” and a projected \$60 billion to be spent by the US government on an anti-missile missile defence system to protect against the unpredictability of such states.<sup>66</sup> The very notion of an anti-missile missile defence system exemplifies the double bind of protection-vulnerability which conditions our relationship to the *technē*. In order to immunize the corpus against unknown “external” threats, the body politic deploys highly sophisticated technical means of forestalling a missile attack by establishing its own system of preventative, sometimes nuclear force. In doing so, however, the corpus also attacks its own defenses since it leaves itself vulnerable not only to the irreducible unpredictability of such technologies (as ongoing debates surrounding Fukushima and nuclear power more generally attest) but also to their hijacking by terrorist threats “interior” to the body politic itself. Like the originary Promethean *savoir* of fire, nuclear power is an exemplary *technē* which, once “stolen,” produces effects which are as potentially beneficial as they are potentially harmful.

The status of the *technē* as a “drug” (*pharmakon*) for anxiety, both affective poison and its ineffective antidote, is linked to its simultaneous specular and spectacular qualities. For Derrida, the specular aspect of technics (its ability to relay a “presence” that is putatively self-identical) is always undercut by the irreducibly spectacularizing nature of the technical medium. The latter means that we must be continually vigilant with regard to the ostensible “neutrality” of the act of communication, what Derrida elsewhere refers to as the “artifactual” quality of news reporting.<sup>67</sup> In his interview with Borradori, Derrida develops his account of the spec(tac)ularity of technics by examining media

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<sup>63</sup> “Autoimmunity,” 101-2.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 102 (translation modified).

<sup>65</sup> *Rogues*, 105.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>67</sup> *Echographies*, 5.

responses to 9/11, in particular the compulsiveness with which footage of the towers' collapse was repeated on loop (*en boucle*) in the days and weeks following September 11. Like the looped "lasso"<sup>68</sup> deployed by Ernst in his game of *fort-da*, this tele-technological "loop" is vital to understanding our affective investment in the attacks. "Direct" televisual images of the "slashing open" and "collapse" of the Twin Towers were reproduced and repeated throughout the world with a sense of specular immediacy, as though they were being received for the first time, through "live transmission."<sup>69</sup> This illusion of specularity was, however, structurally undermined by the irreducible gap, distance, or delay (*différance*) between the inscription of the event as re-presentation and the eventual interpretation of this inscription. As Derrida puts it in *Echographies*, "real time is simply an extremely reduced 'différance,' [...] there is no purely real time because temporalization itself is structured by a play of retention or of protention and, consequently, of traces."<sup>70</sup> This oscillation of temporo-spatial proximity and distance structured our interaction with the signifier-images of destruction and explains why they were circulated with such intensity by national and international media, like a "film that runs and reruns ceaselessly on screens across the entire world."<sup>71</sup> Our horrified viewing of the footage involved a delicate play (*jeu*) of pleasure and unpleasure, of *fort* (distance, "there") and *da* (proximity, "here"): "a frightening, frightened, terrified pain [...] bound up with an unavowable elation (*jouissance*), one that is all the more unavowable, uncontrollable, and irrepressible insofar as it operates at a distance, neutralizing the reality and thus keeping it at bay."<sup>72</sup> The looped (*en boucle*) images abreact accumulated anxious tension by *localizing* the event in time and space (the events were "there": calculable, finite, closed or *bouclé* in French), but they also aggravated our apprehension in the face of an incalculable future in which the bonds (*boucles*) tying us to ourselves and to others could one day be violently severed. It is always possible that an attack might take place "here," even if we cannot calculate exactly where or when.

The structural paradox of technics is thus that it "at once confirms and neutralizes the effect of [...] reality."<sup>73</sup> If there was something inherently reassuring in the specular act of repeating the "real" of the attacks, this repetition was not a retroactive attempt at "mastering" the traumatism of a past wound (as in Freud's theory of anxiety), but was rather an attempt at guarding against the shock of the future itself, whose repressed incalculability had suddenly returned in a moment of unforeseen violence.<sup>74</sup> At the same time, this specular desire for closure was frustrated by the media's affective accentuation—for commercial, ideological, or political reasons—of the spectacular quality of the images, of the anxious vulnerability that had suddenly been exposed.

Our affective engagement with such images of suffering exemplifies Derrida's argument for the untenability of a conception of the political divorced from the affective lives of individuals. This inextricability is exemplified in the quasi-obligation facing every politician in the wake of a national trauma such as September 11: "public" displays of mourning must always evince a "private" affectivity, the ability to affect and be affected by traumatizing events. While such *pathos* is never without a share of cathartic yield, the technical reproduction of images of violence and grief also opens the realm of the political as a region in which putatively "private" affect is abreacted or intensified in the act of "transmission." It is important to be clear here, however: what Derrida is *not* proposing is a theory of political affect in which feelings such as anxiety, fear or terror are susceptible to straightforward "manipulation" by competing ideological interests. The latter would imply that

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<sup>68</sup> *The Post Card*, 321.

<sup>69</sup> "Autoimmunity," 188, n.8.

<sup>70</sup> *Echographies*, 129.

<sup>71</sup> "Autoimmunity," 188, n.8.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> "Autoimmunity," 188, n.8.

<sup>74</sup> Martin McQuillan locates a reverse strategy in the United Kingdom's response to terrorist attacks on its own soil, though one which again illustrates the kind of "politics" of anxiety I have been tracing here. Instead of trying to "work through" the traumatic character of such attacks (through a looping of live footage, for instance), British media and political institutions tend to stress the preparedness of the state and its emergency services to protect against future attacks. See his *Deconstruction After 9/11* (New York & London: Routledge, 2009), 12.

such feelings can be experienced in an “immediate”, “natural” or “autonomous” state *before* being subject to subsequent political or ideological manipulation. On the contrary, Derrida’s concept of technics entails that our relationship to ourselves and to others is always already *mediated* or “framed.”<sup>75</sup> This structural dependency on technics means that affect is always already pre-conditioned by fluctuations of intensity which vary in function of the particular technological medium in question—a variance usefully illustrated by Ernst’s sampling of different technical objects.

This explains why Derrida, when directly addressing the problem of political affect, always eschews a vocabulary of “manipulation” or “perversion” and prefers instead the more precise notion of “exploitation.” In *Echographies*, for instance, the Front national’s rhetoric of a culturally and racially “pure” body politic is said to “exploit” the fear of the body’s invasion by that which is foreign to it.<sup>76</sup> Conversely, in *Politics of Friendship*, we saw, Derrida is determined not “to exploit that which, as it were, *screens out* reflection by projecting itself with the pathetic and ‘sensational’ violence of images on to a too easily mediatizable scene.” The term is well chosen, for etymologically “exploitation” suggests a process both of unfolding or ex-plication (thus of imposing univocal meaning where there is complexity and difference) and of military capturing (as an image is often said to “capture” our attention). This idea of capture returns us to Freud’s fundamental notion of *Besetzung* (“military occupation”), the cathexis by which the energy of affect is “bound” to a representation such as a word, object, image, or memory-trace. For Derrida, we have seen, this the act of binding the energy of affect to a signifier is always haunted by the potential dissolution of the bonds which tie us to others. What deconstruction shows us is that there can be no sovereign movement of binding that would be free of this anxiety of unbinding, of a feeling of unconditional powerlessness over ourselves and others. Our engagement with friends, lovers, families, fellow citizens is thus always agonized by the same affective double bind: however passionate our investment in others may be, this investment is as fragile and volatile as politics itself.

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<sup>75</sup> For a detailed discussion of this technical “framing” of affect, see Judith Butler, *Frames of Warfare: When Is Life Grievable?* (London & New York: Verso, 2009).

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.